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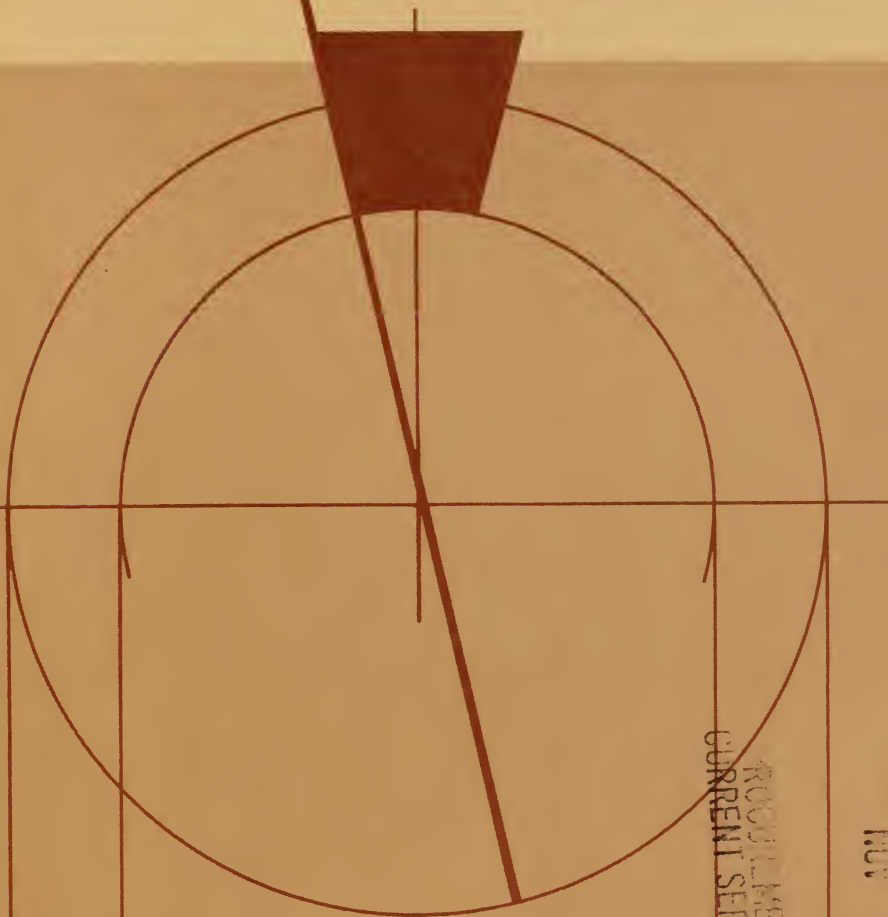
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# EFFECTIVE INFORMATION DEVICES FOR COOPERATIVES

by Irwin W. Rust



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**Educational Circular 29**

**October 1966**

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# Foreword

**This circular is based on information developed during the 1965 series of member relation conferences sponsored jointly by the Farmer Cooperative Service and the American Institute of Cooperation. The theme of the conference was Improving Member and Community Support of Cooperatives.**

**This circular is intended to stimulate thinking rather than provide answers to specific problems. The ideas expressed represent opinions of cooperative information specialists, leaders, and others, based for the most part on their own experiences in day-to-day operating situations.**

**Much of the material was taken from speeches given at the 1965 member relations conferences. The following persons presented many of the ideas expressed herein.**

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# **Effective Information Devices For Cooperatives**

**by Irwin W. Rust  
Membership Relations Branch  
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Without pertinent information, people—even the most intelligent—can draw wrong conclusions and act accordingly or even fail to act at all. This fact of life is the main reason cooperatives constantly seek more effective devices for packaging and delivering information.

Effective devices reach people with pertinent facts from which they can draw correct conclusions.

In pointing out the need for developing good information devices, one cooperative leader says, “It has been proved that more than 75 percent of all misunderstandings can be attributed to lack of adequate communication. This applies to our relationships with our families, our bosses, our fellow employees, our patron members, and the general public.”

This publication brings you ideas and suggestions of cooperative member relations and information workers concerning the effective use of various devices in reaching members and the general public.



# Necessary Preliminary

When selecting information devices to use, your first move is to define your audience and your purpose. Who are your intended readers, listeners, or viewers? How do you want to involve them?



Is your audience—

- made up mainly of cooperative members or non-members?
- likely to be receptive, hostile, or indifferent to your message?
- located in one general area or widely scattered?

Is your purpose—

- to give members up-to-date information they can use in their business operations?
- to develop member pride in their cooperative?
- to create a favorable public attitude toward cooperative business?
- to sell a cooperative product?

These are but a few of the many characteristics of audiences and reasons for reaching them with information. The more precisely you can identify both, the better your chances for doing a successful job.

Before you prepare any kind of information to send forth, remind yourself of the growing competition for the time and attention of your audience. Assume that your audience is also being appealed to by a host of other messages and diversions.

As one cooperative executive says, "We are always fighting against the entertainment attractions of modern life."

Consider these statistics on advertising alone, says another cooperative executive.

"From the moment we awaken in the morning until we click off the bedroom lamp at night, some 1,800 advertising mes-



sages are being thrown at us—all competing, all asking for a little bit of our time. It is a physical impossibility to absorb them all. It is impossible to read—or even notice—all the magazine and newspaper ads, to take time out to look at and listen to all the TV and radio commercials, to read all the material that comes through the mail, or to look at all the signs along the streets and in the marketplace.

“This will give you an idea of what we are up against in trying to get our story across to cooperative members and to the community.”

## Oral or Written

The question is not, of course, whether it's always better to say it or write it. But which kind of device is best for a particular use?

The consensus of information specialists is that both methods of presentation are needed in a well-rounded information program. It takes both to tell the story.



### Oral

Most public relations experts agree that, “If we could select one method for improving the company image, to build the public relations program, we would undoubtedly select face-to-

face visits.” Since it is “impossible to make all contacts face to face, the need for personal contact with the community and our members is evident. It can be accomplished with face-to-face contacts, meetings, and visits and the use of advisory boards to determine the success of our efforts.”

In stressing the effectiveness of two-way oral communication, a cooperative advertising executive says, “Several groups each month visit our laboratory to learn and observe firsthand some of the care that goes into the development of all of our products. When these guests return home they become the best salesmen for our products that we can find.

“If we could duplicate, through an advertising message, the impression these folks receive in one day’s visit to the laboratory, then my job would be greatly simplified. This is one way of shortening the communication channel.”



## Written

But we must also recognize the potency of written communication. We are attuned to learning by reading in school. We can reread a point to clarify and solidify it in our minds. Ideas gain permanence with reading. And we can be surer of what the writer meant, as written words are not so often misinterpreted.

There is evidence of increasing interest in use of the written word in cooperatives. In one area alone two large regionals have introduced new membership papers; another has shifted its limited-audience paper from local managers to the entire membership; and yet another has kept its member paper but added a publication for directors and managers.

Summing up the case for the written word, one writer observes: “Perhaps because my craft is writing, I think non-oral communication is growing more important for cooperatives, because the immediacy and frequency of contacts between leaders and members and nonmembers of cooperatives are diminishing.”

Another writer is much more specific—

“In my book, written communication with members is vital to good member relations. No matter what form it takes—a news story, a newsletter, a houseorgan, or a purchased industry magazine—the mere fact that you are making the member feel that he belongs to an organization which is interested in his welfare is justification for the time and effort involved.”

## Specific Devices

In an overall information program, cooperatives use many combinations of specific devices to reach their members and the general public. —

“For a particular cooperative, what the most effective devices are is determined not only by those general problems and opportunities inherent in cooperatives, but also by the association’s own peculiarities.”

## To Reach Cooperative Members

Keeping members informed about cooperatives helps build confidence and support—knits together a loyal membership. It also gives members facts they can pass on to nonmembers.

*Membership Paper.*—Readership surveys on cooperative publications show that members give their membership magazine, newspaper, or newsletter top rank as a source of information about the cooperative. These give them news and facts they don’t get elsewhere.

Through the membership publication, members can be kept advised not only of important association events, such as annual meetings, but on policy matters and changes within the industry that affect the members’ operations.

How the publication can be used indirectly to build public support for cooperatives is described by one cooperative leader as follows:

“While the membership publication goes primarily to members, it also carries messages they can translate to others. It can give a continuing voice and visibility to the cooperative, not only to members, but to others in the community—if the cooperative sees that community leaders get the paper, *if* members talk about articles in it to their friends, and *if* the local editor spots an item he can follow up for his paper.”



About the production of the membership paper—

“It can take on many forms—ranging from a 1-page dittoed or mimeographed sheet to an elaborate printed publication.

“Producing it takes time and organization, but it does not have to be a professional job. It will be read if it contains items of particular interest and value to members and emphasizes the fact that each is a part of the organization.

“It should be published at regular intervals. And its contents should be timely.”

*Other Printed Devices.*—A great variety of other specialized magazines or bulletins and direct mail are part of the communication tool kits of cooperatives.

These devices include: Magazines oriented to members; magazines for leaders giving facts on legal matters; specialized magazines, such as those for dairy farmers; patron newsletters of various types; service news bulletins for users of cooperative products; annual reports; newsletter for delegates; newsletters for fieldmen; newspapers for employees; catalogue of member relations aids.

One editor indicates that some cooperatives might do well to reappraise their direct mail material. “In our association we used so much direct mail (and it was all similar) that the member tired of seeing it. (But) I still feel direct mail can be effective if unique devices are used.”

*Pipeline Information System.*—One cooperative has devised a pipeline information system to reach membership orally with up-to-date information. Here’s how it works.

To begin, a committee of the board of directors develops an outline of the information that is to be passed on. It also develops the technique for dispensing the information—a symposium, forum setup, opposing panels, lectures with buzz sessions, and so on.

The committee presents the material to the board of directors. Board members suggest points of emphasis and clarification of poorly defined explanations.

The material is revised accordingly, then presented at regional meetings by members of the executive committee—sometimes with the help of membership department executives. These meetings are attended by district directors, county presidents, district and subdistrict officers, key elected leaders representing the home service and young cooperator programs; and supervisory personnel from the regional membership and commercial divisions.

From this point the material is moved along in successive presentations until it has reached every member.

“In all of this, there is built-in training. At each level of the system, the people who are responsible for moving the informa-

tion to the next level have a chance to prepare for their assignment. They are exposed to the material itself and to the techniques used in presenting it.

"On completion of a pipeline system, we have our feedback from various elected people and employees. Sometimes this feedback is strong, in the form of written statements. Sometimes it is more subtle, moving through various levels of elected people and employees in the form of opinions or suggestions. Sometimes it isn't available without prodding. But we do get a feedback—and that provides information for the next pipeline.

"We don't pretend that this is the last word in membership relations. We're still perfecting the pipeline. But we are involving people. We are trying to meet their expressed demands and wishes for information. We are helping members develop some basic communication techniques. And we are getting a better informed leadership and membership."

*Meetings.*—A division manager points out that increased use of meetings is one way of accomplishing more personal contact with members and the community. But, "We try to avoid overloading the communication network. We are using more fieldmen as well as more meetings."

He adds, "Person-to-person visits with newly elected officers of local cooperatives have paid off handsomely in increased attendance at meetings, and ultimately, increased sales."

This manager also reports that the 50th anniversary of the cooperative was the occasion for 50 local anniversary picnics. Attendance at the picnics ranged from 500 to 5,000. One picnic received national news coverage.



Says the manager of these picnics, "Another opportunity to have a face-to-face contact and to tell our story."

*Displays and Movies.*—Some cooperatives are putting increasing emphasis on communication through displays and motion pictures. Why? "Our picture-oriented society is doing more of its learning these days from pictures. And we have a growing suspicion that publications tend to talk—issue after issue—to the same people. We hope to broaden our audience through these new devices.

"The displays are used at annual meetings and at agricultural and industrial fairs and expositions. The movies get wide circulation at local cooperative meetings."

*Advisory Committee.*—One cooperative uses various committees made up of members as a way of drawing its members closer to the organization and stimulating more communication feedback. Through these committees the member can express what he feels the organization should be doing.

Advisory committees meet on such subjects as feed, grain, fertilizer, tires, agricultural chemicals, and petroleum products.

"Last year a newsreel of big events in our past fiscal year was a feature of our annual meeting. It was so well received, both by members and management, that we have a mandate to do an annual newsreel. It will be a movie equivalent of our printed annual report."

Another cooperative reports that, "Store displays are effective types of printed information devices, but for a limited audience—only the people who come into your store."

## To Reach the Public

"You don't improve community support for cooperatives without communicating with the community," reminds one cooperative information expert.

Says another, "Every organization has an image. If it wants to maintain or improve that image it must communicate, not only with its members and patrons, but with the general public as well.

"A good image or reputation in the community is priceless. By itself it generates member interest and participation. If the cooperative is accepted as a reputable 'mainstreet' business, favorable public reaction also helps to develop member pride—pride in being a part of a concern that is looked upon with favor by other segments of the business community."



Views of the usefulness of cooperative publications in reaching the public differ.

According to one view, "One of the greatest limitations of cooperative publications as information devices is that they usually reach only members and a small list of prospective patrons. Though community leaders, newspaper editors, and others are included on the mailing list for cooperative publications, it's hard to get them interested in reading a publication directed to farmers."

On the other hand, recent research is cited to support the belief that cooperative publications are effective in informing the public.<sup>1</sup>

"Urban leaders in Kansas with the most favorable attitudes toward cooperatives reported getting their information from the following sources that rated pretty high on a scale of use—pamphlets of cooperatives, of State and national cooperative organizations, and of the Government.

"Urban leaders with unfavorable attitudes did not report any cooperative publications at all as a significant source of information. They did give pamphlets of business organizations as their number two source of information."

*Local Newspaper.*—Most cooperative information people agree that the local newspaper is one of the most important and effective media for communicating cooperative news.

Says one: "We could get more articles in local newspapers if we furnished information that was really news. Remember, an editor is interested in news, such as the opening of a new feed mill. But once it is opened you can't depend on him to sell the feed through news items. You must do that through advertising in his paper."

The kind of stories local editors want?

"They want a story that's news, not just a free plug or free advertising. They want all the facts so they can write the story themselves if you don't have the time or the knack. And they want the local angle, the hard news of general interest to a wide audience.

"They may even need a gimmick, such as the one used by an eastern regional which pays half the cost of engravings if the paper uses a picture to go along with an article supplied by the cooperative."

Meetings, elections, promotions, building of new facilities—these are some of the cooperative activities that make news for the local paper.

Don't overlook paid advertising in the local newspaper, says one information specialist. That's one way of getting important

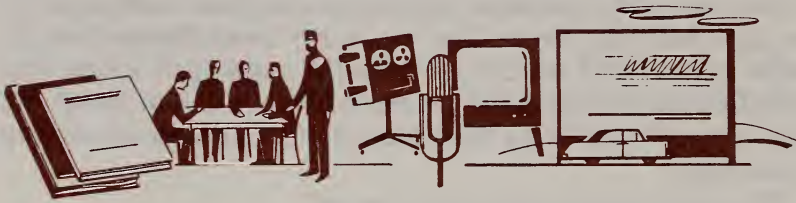
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<sup>1</sup> Rust, Irwin W. What Kansas Urban Leaders Think About Cooperatives—And Why. FCS Service Report 75, Farmer Cooperative Service, U. S. Dept. of Agric., October 1965.

messages to members. "A little paid advertising now and then may pay dividends in the form of stories of your annual meeting or of some other activity in the news columns of the paper."

*General Farm Magazines*.—Advertising in a widely read general farm magazine is another good device for communicating cooperative information. But the advertising must be professionally designed, and must stress the benefits of cooperatives because of what they are doing in pacesetting, service, research, facilities, quality, price, and so on. "Good testimonials are particularly effective."

*Radio and TV*.—"Farm program editors are in the market for farm news and should be on the cooperative mailing list for all news releases concerning the association. Like the newspapers, radio and TV editors want legitimate news that fits into their public service programs."



*Outdoor Advertising*.—"Outdoor advertising has been used by one cooperative with real success during the past two years. "We have found that outdoor advertising is most effective in rural areas, and that it's a fairly inexpensive medium. Maybe one of the reasons it has been effective for us is that it is something new . . . and when you do something new it will attract attention."

## Increasing Effectiveness

"What can we do to make our messages better received and remembered? How can we improve their clarity, sharpness, and simplicity?"

A cooperative executive voices these questions. He also offers some answers, included below.

## **Shorten Lines of Communication**

"The clarity of the message is inversely proportional to the distance it must travel," he states. His company is decreasing the distance the message must travel by increasing emphasis on person-to-person visits, meetings, and use of advisory boards. It is thus reducing the chances for message distortion, interference, and misunderstanding.

## **Keep Communication Channels Open**

Two other leaders emphasize the benefits of increased communication feedback.

Such two-way communication allows members to say what they feel their cooperative should be doing. And it shows how clearly the messages are getting through channels.

## **Hire Competent Information Specialists**

The case for employing professionals to do the information jobs is presented by a publications director.

"I want to register a plea for cooperatives' hiring competent specialists in writing and layout and photography.

"Some cooperative leaders seem to think that a person must first be a passionate advocate of cooperatives and then should try to develop some skill in the communication arts and crafts. That works sometimes, but not always.

"The specialist isn't as hard to come by as some people seem to think. And making a cooperative enthusiast of a communication specialist often is an easy job. News rooms and ad agencies, art studios and photo darkrooms are full of people who got into communication work in the first place because they're idealists.

"Many of them have spent their working lives in a constant search for meaning in their work. You might be surprised at



how many have found and how many more could find that meaning in work for cooperatives. Cooperatives are almost a good-paying domestic Peace Corps for those of us who want something worthwhile to communicate.”

## Improve Quality

“There is some tendency to complain about the general quality—or lack thereof—of cooperative publications.

“But this isn’t a plea for gaudy, slick expensive publications. It’s a call for publications that reflect cooperatives’ products and methods, publications that combine honesty and quality, publications that are straightforward and easy and fun to read.”



## Make Them Read It

The ideas cooperatives present are important. But packaging them with tidy prose gives them the vital impact that makes it easier to convey those ideas to someone else. Following are one editor’s suggestions for improving cooperative prose.

*On Content.*—“We have wonderful stories to tell, concrete and exciting facts, and results. So, let’s tell a tale of benefits, of people doing things, in words that breathe some life.”

When you have something to say—list your key ideas vividly. Then make an “idea road map” of them.

Organization of ideas is difficult for the organizer but rewarding for the reader. It can be done in many ways—the chronological approach . . . the as-it-really-happened way . . . the slap at the reader to get his startled interest . . . the question approach.

“When you start writing, point up the key idea of the sentence and of the paragraph so the reader doesn’t have to hunt for what you’re aiming at.”

What you leave out—cooperative clichés and words that don’t really say what you mean, for example—can also improve content.

“Cut out overusage of cooperative jargon. We all find ourselves using the same tired old phrases in the same tired old way—often a way that only the initiated understand. This jargon wanders around loose in our cooperative communication and fogs up our good words and good intentions.

“We need to be conscious of alternate meanings of words—of connotations in our writing that mean one thing to us and something else to people who don’t understand cooperatives. If we talk about ‘tax-exempt’ cooperatives, we shouldn’t be surprised that the uninformed think cooperatives are tax exempt. We talk about cooperatives versus private business, forgetting that cooperatives *are* private business.

“Now and then we need to stand back from our own words, take a fresh look at them. What did we say? What did we mean? And we need to think about what our ‘inside’ talk means to the public we should be reaching.”

*On Tone.*—This editor spoke on the value of using the right tone or approach—“Our writing needs to lead, not to dictate policy or action. Writing that brings change need not bludgeon the reader black and blue to make the point.

“Our ‘influence’ or educational writing often takes the ‘oughter’ approach. We work to death such words as ‘ought to,’ ‘must,’ ‘should’—words that may irritate our readers.

“Gentle persuasion is difficult, but there are ways. Examples often make the point. Or challenge the reader with a ‘let’s have at it’ approach. Or stir him with emotional or intellectual appeals.

“Go in for shorts—short sentences, short paragraphs. Long unbroken masses of type repel the reader. Good writing is a happy balance of shorter sentences and longer ones, if the latter are well constructed. Take the reader directly to the point, don’t send him off on detours. Stick to the simple forms if you’re not a good sentence manufacturer.”

The speaker suggested *four important don’ts*—

1. “Don’t oversell. Readers have a habit of catching on to this. Be accurate, and give proof positive.
2. “Don’t wax quarrelsome. Take the positive and constructive approach, the we-can-do-the-job-better attitude.
3. “Don’t editorialize. Use adjectives and other commenting words sparingly; stick to defining modifiers generally.
4. “Don’t overwrite. If you strain too much you embarrass the reader.”

*On Interest Getters.*—Readers get tired of reading the same old stuff in the same old way, according to this one editor. So the suggestions are—

“Dare to be different—but not too different. There’s really not much new on this planet, but there are new ways of seeing the old. Try a new approach. Give a battered idea a new twist.

“Personalize writing with names and personal pronouns.

“Have something happening. Use action; put the generalization to work. Appeal to intellect, emotions, needs. Use quotes that spark, from people who count.

“Use a ‘steal’ file—a collection of words, ideas, and writings of others. On a dark and uninspired day—this file may provide just the stimulation you need to get started.”





## Other Publications Available

Assuring Democratic Election of Cooperative Directors. Educational Circular 21. Irwin W. Rust.

Creating Training Programs for Cooperative Directors. Educational Circular 22. Irwin W. Rust.

Using Cooperative Directors To Strengthen Member Relations. Educational Circular 23. Irwin W. Rust.

What Cooperative Members Should Know. Educational Circular 24. Irwin W. Rust.

Recognizing The Ideal Cooperative Director. Educational Circular 26. Irwin W. Rust.

Should Cooperatives Tighten Membership Requirements? Educational Circular 27. Irwin W. Rust.

Managing Farmer Cooperatives. Educational Circular 17. Kelsey B. Gardner.

Improving Management of Farmer Cooperatives. General Report 120. Milton L. Manuel.

Directors of Regional Farmer Cooperatives—Selection, Duties, Qualifications, Performance. General Report 83. David Volkin, Nelda Griffin, and Helim H. Hulbert.

Bylaw Provisions for Selecting Directors of Major Regional Farmer Cooperatives. General Report 78. Helim H. Hulbert, David Volkin, and Nelda Griffin.

“Mr. Chairman—” Information 6.

Membership Practices of Local Cooperatives. General Report 81. Oscar R. LeBeau.

Making Member Relations Succeed. Information 32. Irwin W. Rust.

A copy of each of these publications may be obtained upon request while a supply is available from—

Farmer Cooperative Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
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